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State Charities Aid Association
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State Charities Aid Association

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITING INDIVIDUAL AND
ASSOCIATED VOLUNTEER EFFORT IN
BEHALF OF THE POOR.

PAPER READ BY MISS SCHUYLER AT A CONFERENCE OF THE STATE
CHARITIES AID ASSOCIATION, NEW YORK, MAY 9TH AND 10TH, 1878

TO BE OBTAINED AT THE OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATION, PRICE FIFTEEN CENTS

NEW YORK

6 EAST FOURTEENTH STREET

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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State Charities Aid Association.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITING INDIVIDUAL AND ASSOCIATED VOLUNTEER EFFORT IN BEHALF OF THE POOR.

[Paper read by Miss Schuyler at a Conference of the State Charities Aid Association, New York, May 9th and 10th, 1878.]

The Elevation of the Poor in their Homes, that department of our work, which has been assigned to me to represent at this Conference, is too large a subject to be adequately treated in a single paper. I will therefore simply take up one portion of it and lay before you, for your consideration to-day, *the importance of uniting individual and associated volunteer effort in behalf of the poor.*

In those early days of thinly settled communities, when riches and poverty were measured by a few more or less bushels of corn, or head of cattle, when each man was known to all his neighbours, how simple must have been the relation of rich and poor. How easy and natural for the more fortunate to share his store with his neighbour in distress, as a service rendered to a friend, as recognising and strengthening the tie of a common brotherhood.

Now, in our large cities, one wanders for miles among strange faces in crowded streets. The extremes of poverty, the extremes of luxury meet and jostle each other, and stare and pass on.

Mendicancy has become a profession and the study of pauperism a science. Now, the unnatural increase of the dependent classes, fostered by ourselves from a mistaken view of charity, demands, to stem its current, associated, organized effort of the highest ability; demands also that, stripped of its false garb of almsgiving, raised from its low estimate of money-value, charity itself shall be redeemed, restored both in word and in deed to its original meaning of love.

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, * * * and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing," says Saint Paul. How far have we wandered from that early teaching, when we use the words charity and almsgiving as synonymous terms!

Dealing with pauperism on the large scale which its present magnitude requires, well-organized, associated action becomes necessary. This is apparent. But individual action is equally necessary if we would help the poor in what seems to us the better way. May I point out to you what I mean by individual action? I mean personal intercourse with the poor, a wish to know them, willingness to take a great deal of trouble about them as individuals, to become their friends.

On other occasions, I have repeatedly said that three or four poor families were as many as any one visitor might better undertake—a visitor, I mean, having other duties, as most of us have, and able to give comparatively little time to visiting the poor. And why so few? Surely, says some young and generous spirit, longing to give something of the brightness and freshness of youth to gladden the lives of those who have never had any youth, surely I can do more than this. Should my four families live in the same neighborhood, it would take only one hour to visit them all once a week, and I have more time than this to give to the poor. Yes, I answer, fifteen minutes to each family is quite enough, is far too much, if it means that you stop merely to enquire “how they are getting on?” “Not ill, I hope? What! an accident? I am very sorry. Of course not able to work. Nothing to eat? Horrible! Here, take this dollar, and I will look in again next week!” And so, hastily retreating, to escape the thanks which follow, on from one poor family to another, and so home, with a glow of satisfaction that at least those people have a dinner to-day—only “I might just as well have given my whole morning, and have visited a dozen families as those four.” And with this the thought is dismissed; and the next day, and the next bring their round of home duties and social engagements, until “my morning for visiting the poor” comes in its turn again, when the visits and the dollars are repeated. What permanent good has been done? If your family are worthless, if the man is shamming illness, they take the gift as the fair spoil of your credulity, and ask themselves what other dupes, be they churches, societies or soft-hearted individuals, will listen to the same or another story and supply the dollars for the other days, until you come again. All you have done in this case is to have helped to pauperize a family. On the other hand, suppose the story to have been a true one, suppose the man to have been a respectable, hard-working mechanic, temporarily disabled, how much have you helped him? Was it being a friend, was it helping him him in time of need to go off and leave him, without knowing what was to become of him and his family during your absence? And in either case, true or false, has your dollar helped to benefit that family permanently?

My friends, it will take all the time you can spare, all the thought you can give, to understand and to help as you might, a very few of the many who need your help so sorely. Suppose you give of your best thought and best effort to *one* of these poor families, and

see what this may mean. Let us take one of the cases usually considered discouraging,—a widow with partly-grown up children, boys and girls, where not one of the family knows how to do anything towards his own support, where all have lived along in some mysterious way, partly by picking up odd jobs, partly by alms, with no future before them beyond a continuance of this same hand-to-mouth existence. What can be done for these people? I think you must begin by seeing enough of them to know all about them, by studying the character and natural abilities of each member of the family, before you can know what you can try to do for each. If they know nothing, this must first be made apparent to them; for it is not in human nature to acknowledge willingly that we cannot do some *one* thing well. All women think they can sew and wash, all men will sooner break our necks than acknowledge they cannot drive, and so our poor woman undertakes washing or sewing, or house-cleaning—knows how to do everything, but can't get any work. Suppose we begin by giving her some of our own clothes to wash, and when she brings them home torn to pieces, instead of being annoyed, ask her, very gently, if she would not like to take a few lessons in washing, offer to arrange to have her taught, and tell her you will give her another trial with your own clothes later, and will try to find work for her. If that woman has a spark of ambition and good feeling she will accept your offer; and the next time, your washing will be well done. I think the few dollars spent in replacing what that first lesson has cost you, will have done better service than if they had been given outright in several of your fifteen minute visits. And the eldest daughter wishes to learn to work upon the sewing machine; and the son is willing to take a trade; and the little children might better go to school. You see that they are taught; and at first help to find work for them, and stay by them, and encourage them to let you know of their successes or failures; at last they stand on their own feet, and make their own way, and when they come to see you it is to tell you how well they are getting on, or to seek your sympathy when in affliction. But then that family, for the case is not a fictitious one, required more time than fifteen minutes a week; more time, much thought, some effort, more money perhaps that first year. This you have given; and what have you received? God's gifts are many and come to us in various ways, and the word spoken to one differs from that spoken to another. But is there, can there be, anything more satisfactory in our intercourse with the poor, than to have those who first came to us as beggars, come at last as friends, wanting our sympathy in their joys and sorrows, but not wanting our money!

And your poor mechanic, temporarily disabled? Could you not have seen his doctor, and spoken a good word for him to his employer, and arranged to help him until well again by a loan, for which he would have given security—as such men can,—and repaid you later in small instalments? Why break down his honest pride

and self-respect by making him, for the first time, a recipient of alms? Why let him toss in fevered anxiety with care for the morrow, when the sleep of to-day is so important for his recovery? Your one dollar given can do but little for him; your one hundred dollars loaned can do much.

Shall I go on and indicate what might be done for your third poor family, for your fourth poor family, ways by which their own power of self-help may be developed, or are these two instances sufficient? And have I made clear that to those of us who have other duties, who can give but the smaller portion of our time to visiting the poor, it may be better to take a few families, and do our very best by them, that is, give them of our thought and interest as well as our money—give them a portion of ourselves in fact—than to attempt to do a little, and that unsatisfactorily, for a great many poor families.

And here I leave this first part of my subject, hoping to have shown that to elevate the poor they must be dealt with, not in masses, but as individuals and by individuals. It remains for me to speak of the importance of uniting associated effort with individual effort, if we are to attempt permanently to benefit the poor in any far-reaching, comprehensive way. I have great sympathy with conscientious visitors among the poor. None know so well as they how utterly unsatisfactory dole-giving is. None know so well how many hours are wasted in travelling from one end of the city to the other to find the distant poor, when others equally needy live close at hand. And none would more thankfully substitute permanent help for alms-giving: but how to find it? Where is the industrial training to be found, says the practical worker, how is the loan to be obtained, above all where is the work to be had for those out of employment? It is to answer just such questions that the visitors need and should have the support of a compact, well-organized body of able associates behind them, always ready to assist them. By the plan sketched out in our 4th Annual Report, and which I shall quote later, the visitors of each District report to a small District Committee, composed of some seven or eight active members, men and women, who meet weekly to receive the reports of the visitors and to act upon them. The visitor is obliged to make a most searching investigation into the circumstances of each new applicant, verifying his statements by the testimony of physician or clergyman, landlord or employer. The character and amount of relief to be given, if any, are decided by the Committee, and the decision transmitted to the applicant through the visitor. Upon the ability and good judgment of the District Committee will very much depend the increase or diminution of pauperism in the District, always supposing the hearty co-operation of all existing relief agencies to have been secured. It is needless to add, that the ablest and most experienced visitors among the poor make the most valuable members of these Committees.

What is the practical working of this system of uniting organized and individual action? Having spoken somewhat in detail of the more personal duties of visitors, perhaps a few examples can best illustrate the kind of service to be looked for from a District Committee. The applications have all been thoroughly investigated, and are of various kinds. One visitor reports a sick child, whose recovery, the doctor says, depends upon its removal from the foetid atmosphere of the tenement house and whose parents are able to pay a small sum to meet the expenses. An arrangement with an existing agency for just such cases having already been made by the Committee, the decision is quickly reached, and the necessary order filled out. Perhaps the application of our poor, disabled mechanic for a loan, comes before the Committee, with the assurance that security will be furnished. The loan is granted from a fund for the purpose, and the office agent of the Committee directed to see that the legal blanks are properly filled by borrower and surety. The visitor suggests industrial training, and asks for a small sum to pay contingent expenses. This is allowed, and the visitor is referred to institutions organized to provide for such cases. Applications for employment are met by reference to the employment register, kept at the office, or to the daily bulletin, from the Labor Exchange Bureau. Relief is asked for parents whose children are able, but not willing to support them, and is refused, with an intimation that, if necessary, legal steps will be taken to enforce the statute, or relief is denied upon the ground that the eldest girl is fitted to go to service, and the Committee offers to furnish the outfit, and find her a place, but will give no other relief. Of course the decisions of the Committee are naturally guided by the suggestions of the visitors. Perhaps the visitor reports the case of a destitute widow, with young children. And here one of the few exceptions is made of giving a regular support, supposing always that no "Widow's Society" exists to meet the need. The Committee decides that the children must be taken care of, and that the proper person to do this is their mother; that the family-life should be maintained, as best for mother and children. And so the necessary regular payments are to be made through the visitor, the support being promised only on condition that each child shall go to school, and be trained to some industrial pursuit; that the children, as they become old enough, are to assist to support the family, and eventually, at some fixed period, the gradually diminishing payments shall cease, and the family be left to support itself. This end is always to be held out by the visitor as a desirable attainment.

It will be seen that the Committee not only decides upon the relief granted, basing its decisions always upon the principle of strengthening the self-reliance of those whom it assists, but that it is also the headquarters for all practical information which may be required by the visitors. The Committee must know, among other things, what cases can be referred to existing institutions,

societies and churches, within the district, or beyond it; the condition of the labor market at home and abroad; the rate of rents; the prices of clothing and provisions; the weekly sum required to support a given number of persons; which savings banks are trustworthy, and which boarding-houses for shop girls can safely be recommended. The work of the Committee, stated briefly, would seem to be that of gathering practical information as to the best means of helping the poor, as well as the exercise of the most careful judgment in the use of it. I recall with pleasure, as an instance of the varied knowledge required by these District Committees, an incident which occurred at a meeting at which I had the privilege of being present, of one of the Committees of the London Charity Organization Society. There were, I think, six members present, two ladies and four gentlemen. The applications were taken up in order, and passed upon. The detailed knowledge of the necessities of the poor, and how to meet them, the thoughtful and humane consideration given to each case, the conscientiousness which attended each decision, impressed me deeply. It was the earnestness of people who realized that the action then taken might influence the lives of others for good or for evil. Among the last cases reached was one of unusual interest. The visitor sent in an application for relief from a married man, who claimed that he was sober and industrious, had regular and steady work, and yet could not support his wife and children upon the wages earned. The investigations proved this to be true, the man being an unskilled workman, able only to fill a subordinate and badly-paid position in a stone-cutter's yard. I remember the puzzled look which passed over every face but one, as the Chairman asked for the decision of the Committee. Of the man's industry, of his worthiness, there could be no doubt, nor of his being paid the full market price for his labor, nor was there any doubt that with the utmost economy his earnings were insufficient to maintain his family. And yet to grant relief in this case would be simply to supplement wages, and keep them low. What was to be done? Miss Octavia Hill had not spoken. The Chairman turned to her: "Miss Hill, have you any suggestion to make?" "I think," she answered, quietly, "that this is a case for migration. In the north of England, at ———, mentioning the town, there is a greater demand for that kind of labor than here. The wages there are higher, by so many pence, than here, and the rents are lower than the London rents. I think this man can support his family there by the work he knows how to do. I will take this case," she added, "and make further enquiries. Should my information prove correct, I would suggest a grant for travelling expenses."

How simple the problem seems when we know how to solve it!

If then our volunteer visitors need to be sustained by the associated action of a District Committee, our little District Committee needs the support of a powerfully organized body behind it, to

which it can look for strength and assistance. This central, governing body, to which all the District Committees report, should be composed largely of representatives of churches, of charities, of all existing relief agencies. It should deal with the larger questions of reform, those which need to be grappled with by students of social science, those requiring legislative action. It should publish monographs upon Improved Dwellings for the Poor, Rapid Transit, Co-operative Stores, Provident Dispensaries and the like, and furnish to its District Committees, and to the public, the best attainable information upon these and kindred subjects.

The very composition of such an organization as I have described is a pledge of co-operation on the part of the societies represented in it. With such co-operation, and strengthened by the best thought and executive ability of the day, as an organization representing the soundest principles of philanthropy is sure to be, it must sooner or later make itself felt as a most important and powerful agency in behalf of the Elevation of the Poor in their Homes.

Three years ago, in our Third Annual Report, we sought to indicate some of the principles upon which associated action in behalf of the poor might be based. In the report of the following year these were expanded into a suggestion of a general plan for a large city, which aimed at combining the strength of united action with the freedom of individual effort. And again, this year we have seen no reason to doubt the value of the principles first defined, and which have now, to some extent, been put into practise by our Visiting Committees and others, in various parts of this and other States.

Let me repeat the suggestions contained in our Fourth Annual Report:

"The city should be districted into small divisions, following, as far as possible, existing legal or recognized districts.

"A corps of volunteer visitors—men and women—should be organized for each district, a small number of families being allotted to each visitor.

"In each district a Central Head-quarters Office would be required, in a convenient situation, with one paid male official, who should be an experienced visitor among the poor. His duties would be, to have a knowledge and keep a record of all the work done in the district, to assist the visitors when required, to take their places in an emergency, and to be always on hand to answer questions and supply information.

"The visitors and officials would report weekly to a District Committee, composed of active working members only, meeting at the head-quarters office. Such Committee would examine the report of each case and determine the amount of relief to be given, besides regulating the details of its own work.

"There should be one Central Committee, to which all District Committees would be responsible and all reports made, and on which each Committee would be represented.

"This Central Committee or Council would determine the general principles by which the District Committees should be governed, and the proper mode of carrying out their special work.

"These suggestions may be summarized as embracing the following points:

"First—That visiting must be searching, frequent, and intelligent.

"Second—That relief, when given, should aim at the permanent improvement of those relieved, and the development of their resources.

"Third—That the visitors should not dispense relief on their own responsibility.

"Fourth—That a centralized and co-operative system of relief, in which all societies and persons may take part under direction, is essential for the complete development of the plan."

For New York City, whether the plan adopted be the one indicated or something better, the Board of United Charities is the proper representative of co-operative action. During the three years of its existence, the work of this Board has commanded the respect and the gratitude of all citizens who know what it has been. Through its twenty Ward Committees it has, this past winter, accomplished the very great labor of investigating the cases of 14,010 applicants for city coal. This is at present the only form of official out-door relief granted, and is a great improvement on the old system. The Third Annual Report of this Board, just published, gives interesting and valuable details of its work.

Our Association is acting in full concert with the United Charities; and the Joint Committee appointed from both bodies to prepare a plan for the further co-operation of the charities of this city, is watching with deep interest the experiments now being tried in Buffalo and elsewhere, if haply they may find sufficient encouragement to warrant the recommendation of similar action here. I take this opportunity of stating that any individuals, societies or churches who may wish to co-operate with the Board of United Charities and this Association, in some such general organization for this city as that suggested, may send their names to our Secretary, to be registered for future use. Let it be remembered that hundreds of volunteer visitors are needed, men and women; that there is work for all, and a place for all who may wish earnestly to join in some co-operative movement in behalf of the poor of this city.

The Charity Organization Society of Buffalo, recently formed, is the best example of co-operative organized volunteer effort to be found in this country. One of the underlying principles is "the complete severance of charitable relief, and other charitable work of the Society, from all questions of religion, politics and nationality." The plan of the Buffalo Society, and the plan I have given, are based upon the experience of the Charity Organization Society of London, which has now been in successful operation for nine years. The best associated volunteer work I have seen, sound in

principle and comprehensive in plan, is that represented by this Society; and I commend its publications to all who may wish to pursue the study of the subject. It does not include in its plan of organization the appointment of volunteer visitors, relying for this personal element upon co-operation with the volunteer visitors of the parish churches of the different districts.

To the delegates of our Visiting Committees, present with us to-day, this co-operative work among the poor is familiar, many of them having been engaged in it for the past three years. It would be invidious to mention the names of those whose work in this direction has been especially good, where all have done so well. It is hoped that where no such organization already exists, our Visiting Committees will add to their present work of visiting the poor in the public institutions, a Standing Committee, upon the Elevation of the Poor in their Homes.

For the benefit of our visitors, and for all visitors among the poor, who may wish to have them, the Association has published this spring two monographs, one upon *Loan Systems*, with the legal blanks necessary for giving the system practical effect in this state, the other a little Hand-book for visitors to the poor, entitled, the *Sanitary Rights of Dwellers in Tenement-Houses, in New York City and Brooklyn*. Both of these can be obtained from our Secretary at cost price, of fifteen cents and five cents respectively. The Association is collecting information which, although the encouragement at present is small, it hopes may eventually lead to the establishment of a Labor Exchange Bureau. We have also been much interested in Improved Tenement Houses for the Poor, built upon the commercial principle. In our Sixth Annual Report, just issued, we have given a full account of the financial success of Mr. A. T. White's experiment of Improved Dwellings in Brooklyn, and we hope that other public-spirited citizens may be induced to do the same for New York City, and for other cities in this state. To those familiar with our down-town tenement houses, no argument as to the necessity of improved dwellings is necessary.

I have thus tried, in this paper, to show the importance of uniting individual and associated volunteer effort in behalf of the poor, illustrating this subject by examples of what I have myself seen and known, and adding a very general sketch-plan for giving the principles practical effect.

"Societies are hard," say the poor. "Charity pauperizes," says the political economist. Yes, there are societies which are hard, and there is a so-called charity which is weakness. But a society which reaches the poor through the warm hearts of hundreds of volunteer visitors cannot become a machine; and the charity which strives to follow in the footsteps of the Master, will learn from Him that the truest love will be as firm as it is gentle, and can never become weak. Have those old days of brotherly love between rich and poor so entirely passed away that they are never to come again? I firmly believe they will. But I believe that we

must become better Christians; we must come nearer to the meaning of Christ's love to man, by taking some of that love, so freely offered, into our own lives, and giving *that* to the poor, before charity and brotherly love can again stand side by side, before, in this world, the rich man or the poor man will be judged for what he is, and not for what he has.

The noblest example I know of the power of individual, personal influence in the lives of the poor, tending always to elevate and never to pauperize them, is that which I saw when I went with Miss Octavia Hill into the homes of some of her London tenants. Fortunately there are two published volumes of Miss Hill's collected papers, which give an insight into a little of the depth and beauty of her work. They will be found a practical help and an inspiration to all who are engaged in personal work among the poor.

A few words upon co-operation, and I will no longer claim your attention.

A few years ago the Bureau of Charities opened a registry for the benefit of all societies working among the poor. These were asked to send, at stated times, the names of their respective beneficiaries, to be entered upon it. The system was so complete that at a glance one could tell whether the applicant was receiving relief from one or more societies, and which of them. The object of the registry was not only to detect imposture, but to enable each society to concentrate its relief upon fewer recipients, thus providing more fully for those who were worthy: to work in fact with the efficiency of concerted action. And yet after a trial, which demonstrated the feasibility of such a system, it had to be abandoned, simply because several of the more important charities of the city refused to join in the movement, and without general co-operation it could not succeed.

To furnish a plan for the co-operation of the charities is not difficult. The principles are well-known, and easily defined. But to secure for it the hearty support of the community is not so easy. Without this the best plan must fail, for its very essence is co-operation. And this working together must not be half-hearted. Charities must be willing that each should know what the other is doing. They must allow their visitors to visit the few families who live near them, or those living in a small, defined section of the city. Churches must be willing to believe that it is possible for visitors of all religious persuasions to visit poor people of all religious persuasions, without attempting to proselyte them. And visitors must have the self-control to obey the rules they have pledged themselves to follow. And all must do this heartily, earnestly desiring co-operation, not making difficulties, but honestly striving to overcome them. For only when our churches shall have sufficient faith in God to have more faith in each other; only when our charitable societies shall be charitable to each other, as well as to the poor; only when our citizens shall be willing to

give themselves, some part of their thought and heart, as well as their money, to those who need them, may we hope to work together for the poor, and with the poor, as we should.

The Elevation of the Poor in their Homes! How can we help towards it? How shall we each find the one little niche we are best fitted to fill, where earnestly and humbly we may work on, catching perchance, as we work, some little glimpse of God's immortal plan of bringing all His children nearer to Him.

